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Visions of the Years of Danger

Dutch Resistance Members Recall the Nightmare

By Thomas O'Toole

Soon after Dutch resistance fighter Teengs Gerritsen was put in the concentration camp at Natzweiler by the Gestapo in 1943, he fell ill with pneumonia and was placed in a hospital with five members of the French Maquis who had just been caught by the SS.

"One of them was already dead and two of the others had bullets in their lungs but they began to softly sing the 'Marseillaise' together," Gerritsen recalled recently at Washington's Army and Navy Club. "When the Gestapo guards heard them, they filled hypodermic needles with gasoline and injected and murdered each one of the Frenchmen on the spot. I never got the injection and to this day I don't know why. I would have liked to have met that Gestapo fellow after the war and ask him why he didn't inject me."

Another time, Gerritsen said he hid himself in a toolshed when the concentration camp commandant ordered the prisoners to appear at roll call on Christmas Day. Gerritsen remembers that the commandant was drunk and picked out six prisoners to be hanged that night.

"One of them was the man standing in my place," Gerritsen said. "They never noticed that I was missing and that is why I am alive today."

Gerritsen, a legend in The Netherlands because of such stories, came to the United States to help celebrate the 200th anniversary of Dutch-American friendship and to honor the members of the Dutch resistance and the U.S. Office of Strategic Services who lost their lives in Holland during World War II.

Gerritsen wasn't the only Dutch resistance fighter to make the trip. Men with names like van den Heuvel, Hofmeester, Hergarden, Zeegers,

Peijnenburg and van Lanschot also came and told their stories. Among the many listeners were Prince Bernhard, Dutch Ambassador J.H. Lubbers and Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Casey, who had been liaison chief between the OSS in London and the Dutch resistance during the war.

Dutch resistance was stronger than most of the rest of occupied Europe. Three months after the war began, Queen Wilhelmina, from exile in London, ordered the Dutch to resist. More than 10,000 Dutch resistance fighters were captured and killed by the Germans, fully half the Dutch resistance force.

Gerritsen was caught in a scene that could have come right out of the movie "Casablanca." Two men wearing black leather overcoats showed up one day at his office in the Ministry of Import and Export, showed him their papers and took him off to prison. "Most of my friends were already there when I was brought into the prison," Gerritsen said. "We had a traitor in our ranks. I suppose you can't avoid it."

But one Dutchman who managed to avoid the Gestapo all through the war was Cees (pronounced Case) van den Heuvel, who was the intelligence chief for the Dutch resistance during the war. While Gerritsen worked in The Hague until he was caught, van den Heuvel did his job in Rotterdam.

"Rotterdam was the best place to be in Holland during the war because it was the most chaotic," van den Heuvel said. "The Hague was a company town like Washington where everybody was recognizable and Amsterdam was overrun with Gestapo because that's where they thought all the Dutch spies would be."

Van den Heuvel escaped capture by changing his identity and disguis-

ing himself. Only 25 when the war began, van den Heuvel said he managed to look 40 by never being clean-shaven, wearing old people's clothes and his hair a little long, and walking stooped, with his coat collar up.

"Nature helped me, too," he said. "I never had too much to eat and if you look thin you look older."

His job was estimating German military strength and movement in Holland. He had 600 agents scattered across the country, watching the roads and the railways. The agents checked the repair shops where the Germans took their tanks and trucks when they broke down. Among the agents were young women who took advantage of German soldiers drinking in the pubs.

Van den Heuvel discovered that any time a German soldier died, he was buried in a local Dutch graveyard with his rank, company, battalion, regiment and army group marked on his cross. Into the graveyards at night went van den Heuvel's agents, for fresh intelligence on German troop movements.

"That stopped when one of our couriers was arrested and his graveyard report confiscated," van den Heuvel said. "The next day, all the German crosses were gone from the graveyards."

Van den Heuvel had his share of close calls. Once, he and four other resistance fighters stormed aboard a German "schnell" boat at the entrance to Rotterdam harbor, killed one of the sentries left on board and tied up the other before preparing to run the boat across the English

Channel to Great Britain.

"We soon discovered we couldn't start the boat's engine without its distributor," van den Heuvel said. "The 10 sailors who'd left the boat to go to lunch on shore had taken it with them."

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